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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000234

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO MADELYN SPIRNACK, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR S/P JARED COHEN, ASH JAIN
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SOME "INDEPENDENT" SHIA CONTACTS
FRUSTRATED WITH MARCH 14

REF: 08 BEIRUT 1326

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) A number of "independent" Shia contacts have shared with us their exasperation with majority leader Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition. They say that the non-Hizballah Shia community was one of the initial supporters of the principles of March 14 -- Lebanese independence and sovereignty -- but continue to fight what appears to be a losing battle with March 14's leadership to include "acceptable" Shia representatives in March 14's electoral plans. Ahmad al-Assaad and Minister of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine are two independents who plan to run their own campaigns for the parliamentary elections, although their chances of success are slim. To appeal to the larger Shia community and to counter Hizballah's message, some of our contacts suggest that gaining the support of independent Shia clerics is essential to refute Hizballah's religious propaganda.

[1](#)2. (C) At the grassroots level, local NGO Hayya Bina reports that its programs are having success in changing the political discourse and providing in-demand services, such as U.S. Embassy-funded Teach Women English program, in underserved Shia communities. Shia contacts affiliated with Hayya Bina have improved their domestic networks, but also seek to expand their regional contacts. End summary.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Between February 8 and February 23, the Ambassador, DCM, Poloff and visiting Congressional staffers held several meetings with contacts in the "independent" Shia community. This assessment is based on separate discussions with Shia partners and affiliates of USG grant (MEPI, PD, USAID/NDI) recipient NGO Hayya Bina, Minister of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine, MP Yassine Jaber from Nabatieh (non-affiliated, but closer to Amal), Ahmad al-Assaad, a parliamentary hopeful in the mixed Muslim-Christian district of Marjeyoun-Hasbaya, and politically active Nabatieh businessman Abdullah Bitar.

SHIA FRUSTRATED WITH MARCH 14

[1](#)4. (C) "We agree with the principles of Lebanese sovereignty

and independence -- the March 14 coalition's platform -- but Saad Hariri has betrayed us," said several of our "independent" Shia contacts during February meetings. Malek Mrowe (a political partner of U.S. grant recipient NGO Hayya Bina, member of the "Daily Star" newspaper family, and previously known to be close to March 14) and Ahmad al-Assaad were the most vocal in their frustration. They accuse Hariri of squandering an opportunity to strengthen his own standing in the eyes of Shia community. The few Shia advisors with Hariri -- MP Bassam As-Sabeh and likely parliamentary candidate Ghazi Youssef -- do not have a political or religious base in the Shia community, and thus would never be "acceptable" Shia representatives to counter Hizballah's dominance, they argued. Similarly, Minister of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine, the only independent Shia minister in the cabinet, maintained that his views were closer to those of March 14, but Hariri and his allies had made "a lot of mistakes."

15. (C) Among this group of contacts, only Assaad, Shamseddine, and Salah Harake, a former MP from the Baabda district, have stated their intention to contest the June 7 elections. Assaad, portrayed in the local press as a maverick for daring to run an independent campaign in the southern, heavily Shia district of Marjeyoun-Hasbaya, is predicted to gain less than five percent of the vote if he continues to isolate other independent Shia and/or does not eventually work with March 14. Shamseddine, on the other hand, said he planned to run in the Beirut 2 district, but it was decided in a gentleman's agreement in the 2008 Doha Accord that the only Shia seat in the district would go to

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Hizballah. Shamseddine said he would not join a Hizballah list. Therefore, if the agreement holds, he will almost certainly lose his electoral bid.

16. (C) Lokman Slim, Director of Hayya Bina, and Mrowe also were dissatisfied with Shamseddine for not moving the Shia "agenda" forward in the government. Slim acknowledged that his group of contacts were hopeful when Shamseddine was selected as minister (reftel). Instead, Shamseddine "let us down," Slim said. The one recurring principle in these recent meetings was the focus on the need for proportional representation in an electoral law to provide the space for alternative Shia voices, as well as Christian independents. (Note: When the most recent electoral law was debated and passed in September 2008 for the June 7, 2009 parliamentary elections, the provision on proportional representation was not included in the final discussions, in part, due to some March 14's leaders' position against it. End note.)

17. (C) However, most of our contacts agreed that if the independent Shia worked with March 14 in the election and named strong, viable Shia candidates, they could gain at least 10 percent of the votes. This would mark a significant achievement and put the independents on a path to break away from Hizballah's and Amal's dominance over the community. Harake summarized independent Shia political needs in three points: 1) protection for Shia from the state, which should be a non-sectarian institution; 2) independence by not being forced to affiliate with the March 14 coalition or Hizballah's March 8 coalition; and 3) support from respected Shia clerics, such as Ali Sistani (Iraqi) or Mohammad Hassan Fadlallah (Lebanese).

"RELIGIOUS COMPONENT"
IMPORTANT TO COUNTER HIZBALLAH'S MESSAGE

18. (C) To compete with Hizballah's message, Sheikh Muhammad Ali al-Hajj -- a Hayya Bina partner and leader of a Shia Islamic seminary ("hawza") in Beirut's southern suburbs -- argued that the "independent" Shia needed to include a "religious component" in their message. Hizballah, he said, distorted the fundamental beliefs of Shia Islam to suit its

political needs. Historically, Shia clerics were only religious references ("marjaa") and not involved in politics, he said. However, now the lines between religion and politics were blurred, if existent at all, he continued. If "independent" Shia were to appeal to the wider Shia community, it would be necessary for independent clerics to call out the inaccuracies in Hizballah's religious propaganda based on fact and Shia tradition. Separately, Assaad made the same argument and claimed he had the support of 32 sheikhs who were prepared to openly refute Hizballah's religious claims.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH
PROGRAMS BECOMING SELF-SUSTAINING
AND HAVE POSITIVE IMPACT

¶9. (SBU) Slim reported that on the grassroots level, Hayya Bina's programs were having a positive impact in Shia communities throughout Lebanon. In particular, he noted the success of JaDal, an ongoing discussion group organized by Hayya Bina in 2006 to promote political awareness and the exchange of ideas. In addition, Hayya Bina implements the U.S. Embassy's Public Diplomacy-funded "Teach Women English" program, which targets English education for women in underserved communities in Lebanon. The vast majority of participants in TWE are Shia, with some Christians and Druze.

Slim said that demand for TWE continued to grow and was creating business competition in Hizballah-dominated districts. From a political standpoint, programs like TWE, he said, also help Hayya Bina to moderate its trademark as a solely Shia organization.

¶10. (C) Hayya Bina also supports an independent hawza that plans to graduate its first class of moderate, Shia clerics in the next four to five months. Al-Hajj and Hayya Bina said

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they were currently looking for a non-political Shia mufti in Iraq, preferably from Najaf, to "turban" or ordain the new sheikhs to give them greater legitimacy. Once the sheikhs are turbaned, they would return to Lebanon and be placed in mosques around the country, but the cities and districts were not yet determined, they reported. It is likely that at least one of the new sheikhs would be assigned to the expanding Shia community in north Metn, a traditionally Christian district that could play a deciding factor in the parliamentary elections.

SEEKING TO EXPAND LOCAL
AND REGIONAL NETWORKS

¶11. (C) Our contacts acknowledged that there is no unified independent Shia political movement in Lebanon. Yet, the Shia community, they say, is "fed up" with Hizballah and Amal. Our contacts with Hayya Bina credit programs such as JaDal and continued debate among themselves in the current electoral period for improving their alliances with other independent Shia throughout Lebanon. However, they argue that the political representation of the Shia community is not solely a domestic issue for Lebanon alone. Iran, through Hizballah, and Iraqi Shia politicians and clerics (specifically, Tarik al-Hakim and Ali al-Sistani) all have political representation in Lebanon, and, they explained, Beirut is considered a safe-haven in for the minority Shia population in the Arab world, even if the community in Lebanon is dominated by Hizballah. In the view of several of our Lebanese Shia contacts, it is past time to find another alternative to Hizballah and they hope to expand their regional contacts, especially in Najaf (Iraq) to counter Hizballah's continued influence.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) "Independents" (Shia, Christian, or otherwise) will continue to be disadvantaged under the current electoral system, which generally gives the strongest party (Hizballah in the case of the Shia) a virtual monopoly over the community's representation. One alternative advocated by many of our contacts from across the political spectrum is proportional representation. These advocates include not only many of our "independent" Shia contacts (Shamseddine is an especially vocal proponent), but also Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and President Michel Sleiman. Furthermore, in the current system, MPs from one confession who are included in another confession's candidate list (i.e., Shia on the list of Saad Hariri, a Sunni) are viewed as "token" representatives who do not have the support of their own confessional groups. Electoral code reform would be the only way ahead. End comment.

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